

February 28, 2003

SUBJECT: HEALTHY FORESTS INITIATIVE

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

In the wake of several extreme fire seasons across the western U.S., in August 2002 President Bush announced the *Healthy Forests Initiative* to improve the health of our public forest resources. The HFI implements core components of the *National Fire Plan's 10-year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan*. This plan, which was adopted in May 2002 by federal agencies and western governors, in collaboration with county commissioners, state foresters, and tribal officials, calls for more active forest and rangeland management. It establishes a framework for protecting communities and the environment through local collaboration on thinning, planned burns, and forest restoration projects. The HFI proposes administrative changes designed to improve regulatory processes to ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest health. President Bush is also working with Congress on legislative changes designed to help federal agencies accomplish more timely, efficient, and effective implementation of forest health projects.

One effort just getting underway across the Departments of Interior and Agriculture is a "test drive" of new guidance issued December 9, 2002, on the preparation of environmental assessments (EA) for forest-health projects. BLM has identified 10 projects, one of which is in Montana – the Horsethief Hazard Fuels Reduction Project in the Billings Field Office. It is anticipated that the EAs and Decision Records for the projects in this test drive will be completed by June or July 2003. Other administrative efforts announced in December 2002 are proposed changes in the regulations to: 1) "categorically exclude" certain fuels treatment projects on public lands from further environmental analysis in order to speed the implementation of projects; and 2) to clarify and expedite administrative review procedures.

ISSUES:

Wildfires burned over 7.1 million acres of public and private lands in 2002. These fires affected hundreds of communities across the country, tens of thousands of people were evacuated from their homes, thousands of structures were destroyed and sadly, 21 firefighters were killed while battling the fires. The devastation caused by these fires is increasing each year. Drought, epidemic insect outbreaks, disease, and increasing fuel loadings are contributing factors.

Forest fuels have accumulated so significantly that fires no longer burn at natural temperatures or rates. The effect of the fires is long term and having significant impact on vegetation, soil, water, and wildlife resources.

Federal, state, tribal and local governments are making unprecedented efforts to reduce the buildup of fuels and restore forest and rangelands to healthy conditions. The Healthy Forests Initiative arose from the need to make more timely decisions, provide for greater efficiency, and reduce the catastrophic effects of wildland fires on communities and the environment. It is tied very closely to the National Fire Plan and the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Director Kathleen Clarke supports this initiative. She states it will provide for expedited environmental reviews and full public review processes, while ensuring that the projects are carried out efficiently and effectively. She also believes it will preserve the principle of partnerships with local communities and local interests through the use of collaborative processes that include all stakeholders and partners at the local level.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is high now and we expect it to remain high as the initiative moves forward.

There is much support for measures outlined in the initiative, but there is also much opposition to some measures.

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